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**Exploring the women's experience in the works of  
Margaret Atwood**

Thesis

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2005

Univerzita Pardubice  
Fakulta humanitních studií  
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

**Specifikum ženské zkušenosti v románové tvorbě  
Margaret Atwood**

Diplomová práce

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2005

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V Pardubicích dne 27. 6. 2005.

Pavla Chudějová

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank to Libora Oates-Indruchová, PhD for providing me with enriching insight and encouragement, valuable advice and criticism and especially for her endless patience and understanding. I am also indebted to my partner, parents and friends for their unceasing moral support.

## **Abstract**

This thesis deals with the specifics of women's experience in Margaret Atwood's novels *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye*, analysing the strategies the women characters employ in their quest for identity. After the identification of the mechanisms that coerce women to conform to the stereotyped image of an ideal and specification of the conflict between the social conception of an ideal woman and self-perception of the heroines, the work will concentrate on the similarities, differences and effectiveness of the identity seeking strategies with special emphasis on the social changes between the publication of both novels.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato práce se zabývá specifiky ženské zkušenosti v románech Margaret Atwood *The Edible Woman* a *Cat's Eye*. Soustředí se zejména na rozbor strategií, které hrdinky uplatňují při hledání své identity. Po určení a popsání mechanismů, které nutí ženy, aby se přizpůsobily stereotypnímu pojetí ženského ideálu a vymezení konfliktu mezi společenským pojetím ženského ideálu a způsobem, jakým se vnímají obě hrdinky následuje porovnání a zhodnocení strategií, které hrdinky používají k určení své identity. Tato analýza je provedena s přihlédnutím ke společenským změnám, ke kterým došlo v době mezi publikováním obou románů.

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## 1. Introduction

A quest for women's identity has been a key idea of contemporary feminist thought. Feminist literary criticism exposed a serious clash between the traditional view of the women's role in the society and the way women perceived themselves. It is this clash that is of particular interest to Margaret Atwood in her novels *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye*. The heroines of the novels, Marian and Elaine, are bound by the stereotyped notion of their role in society, both of them realize the deficiencies of this concept and try to defy it. The means of their struggle to find their identity, as well as the differences, shifts and similarities in the description of women's experience in relation to the changes of the social climate are the main foci of this paper.

According to the traditional notion, women are feeble, delicate and virtuous creatures who have to be protected by men from the numerous traps of the harsh world looming outside the cosy walls of their homes as pictured in the romantic movies such as *How to Marry a Millionaire* or *Let's Make Love* starring Marilyn Monroe where the main task for a woman is attracting a prospective husband. The range of activities that a woman could pursue while being under the loving protection of her parents or later her husband was rather limited. It mostly comprised of managing the household, breeding the children and being an affectionate and loyal companion to her husband. Being a woman meant being completely dependent and inferior to him. The historian William L. O'Neill ascribes

the origin of the docile and virtuous woman as an ideal of femininity to Victorians and at the same time remarks that it was not received with an overall enthusiasm, especially from those whom it concerned most:

If we assume [...] that the conjugal family system with its great demands upon women was a fairly recent development (not from pre-Christian era) and became general only in the nineteenth century, then the feminist response becomes explicable. [...] The Victorians had attempted, moreover, to compensate women for their increased domestic and pedagogic responsibilities by enveloping them in a mystique which asserted their higher status while at the same time guaranteeing their actual inferiority. Hence the endless polemics on the moral purity and spiritual genius of woman which found their highest expression in the home, but which had to be safeguarded at all costs from the corrupting effects of the man-made world beyond the domestic circle (5).

Victorians put women on a moral pedestal ascribing them moral virtues and sexual purity and thus created an immaculate mystical creature who was to become the role model for every woman of that time. The almost proverbial example of an ideal woman is to be found in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House*, which he wrote in 1854, about his wife Emily whom he regarded a flawless example of Victorian virtues. The woman as described here became the embodiment of the darkest nightmares for feminists. The poem was so influential that even as late as in 1931 Virginia Woolf in her essay *Professions for Women* still considered it necessary finally to unfetter herself and the whole womankind from the pernicious image which helped to lock the whole generations of women in the "safety" of their households. She used the title of this poem to name a phantom whom she had to battle when



composing her works. "The Angel in the House" as Woolf saw her:

[...] was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others (*The Death of the Moth* 202).

Facing this phantom, who prevented great numbers of women from voicing their views freely, Woolf finally arrived at the conclusion that, "[killing] the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (*The Death of the Moth* 204). When confronted with such a "cold-blooded murder" one is tempted to feel compassion towards the tender and loving Angel and asks how could an image of a virtuous and frail woman represent danger to anyone. To those "sensitive" sceptics Woolf was ready to offer this answer: "My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me" (*The Death of the Moth* 203). Indeed, if one is to measure the intensity of the defence by the intensity of the attack then the "murder" appears the only possible means of protection because the Angel in the House assaulted the very core of Woolf's treasured freedom, which she was determined to defend whatever the cost. "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (*A Room of One's Own* 114).

Woolf was not the first woman trying to kill the Angel in the House. The fact that she was able to publish her reviews, essays, articles and novels was the result

of the emancipative efforts of her ancestors; the First-Wave feminists. She acknowledged their achievements in her essay *Professions for Women*:

[...] many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps. Thus, when I came to write, there were very few material obstacles in my way" (*The Death of the Moth* 201).

These women, often despised and ridiculed, managed, against the odds, to win the vote for themselves as well as access to education and careers, and thus opened the door of the safe but suffocating domestic strongholds through which the generation of Woolf could step out into the desirable and adventurous world of men. Yet the "material obstacles" that Woolf mentions were not the only problem women had to overcome. The first feminists encountered a very strong enemy in the form of the Angel in the House. Albeit it was not easy to uproot this popular notion of the ideal woman, Betty Friedan maintained "[t]he feminist revolution had to be fought because women quite simply were stopped at a stage of evolution far short of their human capacity" (Friedan 85). The conflict between their potential and the lack of outlets for its use became unbearable and women started to rebel against the identity that was ascribed to them. In the rapidly changing world they too wanted to have their fingers on the pulse of the events but at this very moment they heard the quiet voice of the virtuous Angel reminding them of their place in the drawing room surrounded by their loving children, waiting for their husband, a voice warning them of the numerous perils that they might encounter in the cruel world outside their homes, the voice appealing

to their sense of maternal and conjugal duties, urging them to stay in the safety under the protection of their husbands, the voice reminding them of their inadequacies to cope with the harsh conditions of the men's world.

Notwithstanding, the First-Wave feminists managed to beat the Angel and win their freedom, yet the phantom, as Woolf called the Victorian ideal, had not resigned and continued to plague the women who embarked on the precarious and exhausting journey towards their new identities. Woolf did her best to kill her Angel but she was well aware that "[it] is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality" (*The Death of the Moth* 203). And she proved to be right in this assertion because just a few years after her death the phantom, the Angel reappeared again reinforced, according to Friedan, by the impenetrable mixture of Freudian theories and modern social sciences and was effectively established as a norm of women's behaviour with a great help of the educational system and the influential and ever agile media. It was this heavily armoured Angel who kept company to twenty-four-year-old Margaret Atwood when she started composing her novel, *The Edible Woman*.

*The Edible Woman* was written in 1965 by a young energetic woman with a fresh M.A. from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, her hands busily working on her Ph.D., who found herself caught in the Angel's world of feminine mystique, offering her the bright future of a happy suburban housewife, a solicitous mother of four or five children and a meticulous chatelaine in her own castle. The other alternative open to her was becoming an independent professional, yet this possibility was

presented as rather unfeminine and therefore undesirable. Marian MacAlpin, the heroine of *The Edible Woman*, finds herself in a similar situation. A young, ambitious university graduate stuck in a tedious job with a market research company contemplating her future and realizing that her only options are, as Atwood states: "a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it" (*The Edible Woman, Introduction*).

*Cat's Eye* was written about twenty years later by a woman who had, in the meantime, acquired a very different perspective. A woman who experienced the Second Wave of feminism sweep through Canada, a woman who had published numerous novels as well as books of poetry and gained worldwide recognition for her works, and also by a keen human-rights activist, and a caring mother well aware of the fact that marriage was not the only career possible for a woman in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet still by a woman who recognized and paid the price for her independence. This woman viewed the reality differently from the eager twenty-four-year-old graduate who saw no escape from the "angelic" trap of her own femininity. This woman bravely faced the Angel and after a long and savage hand-to-hand combat she created a mature, self-asserting character, Elaine Risley, who despite numerous attacks of "nothingness" managed to define, gain and maintain her identity.

While the main character in *The Edible Woman*, Marian, is left with a rather bleak choice of either staying in a dead-end job or getting married, Elaine in *Cat's Eye* seems to exercise much more power over her own life despite the inevitable and often severe consequences of such

actions. Even though the difference between Marian's and Elaine's options is significant, the questions remain why the price for a woman's identity is still so high and what steps can be taken to reduce it. As Atwood herself wrote in her introduction to *The Edible Woman* published by Virago Press in 1980:

It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed. In fact, the tone of the book seems more contemporary now than it did in, say, 1971, when it was believed that society could change itself a good deal faster than presently appears likely. The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject (*The Edible Woman, Introduction*).

This seems to be the core message from Atwood: great changes have been achieved already but a great deal of effort is still needed to straighten the road towards women's identity and make it less painful. The idea of the Angel in the House has many times been exposed as a chief menace to the process of discovering women's identity but the cardinal question, how a woman can effectively kill the obstructive phantom without being seriously injured for the rest of her life, still has not been satisfactorily answered. It seems to be an urgent challenge especially for today's society, in which this problem is often being ridiculed and underestimated and in which a lot is being said, but much less is being done to turn the long muddy path towards women's identity into a properly paved street.

The following chapters will deal with social climate and the post-war phenomenon of the "feminine mystique" as

described by Betty Friedan, tracing the origins of this powerful, stereotyped image of an ideal woman and examining the disciplinary mechanisms that coerce women to conform to the feminine ideal. On this ground the analysis of women's experience of Atwood's heroines will be conducted, identifying the inevitable conflict between the society's conception and women's self-perception with emphasis on the similarities, differences and effectiveness of the survival strategies employed by the women characters.

## 2. Specifics of women's experience

### 2.1. Modernized Angel as the Norm

Moly Hite in her essay *Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye* declares that *Cat's Eye* "[m]ore than any other of Margaret Atwood's fictions [...] raises questions about the relation of the autobiographical 'real' to the meaning of a work of literature" (135). Atwood's works supply ample evidence tempting the reader to interpret them as purely autobiographical.<sup>1</sup> Atwood toys with her reader's imagination in the sense of McLuhan's proposition: "art is what you can get away with" (Atwood 2005). She inserts fictional characters into real buildings, goes through extensive research so that she could render accurately the physical details of her heroines' lives and never ceases probing the contemporary sensitive issues to see whether she can get away with her piercing insights. Ignoring the lure of the oversimplified autobiographic interpretation, one is left with perhaps less piquant yet more objective option of reading Atwood's works in the light of Hite's assertion that: "neither art

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<sup>1</sup> Both heroines are approximately of the same age as the author. Elaine shares with Atwood her entomologist father, tomboy mother a nomadic way of life in her early childhood and the emancipation of all members of the family as well as the approximate time of decision to become an artist and temporary waitress job. With Marian there are fewer links such as the university education, the work for a market research company and higher ambitions; neither Marian nor Atwood want to be a market researcher forever, they both feel they were "being groomed for something higher up" (*The Edible Woman* 19). For Atwood's biography see Appendix 1.

nor personal experience can be separated from the dynamics of power that structure social reality" (136). It is on this ground that the author would like to conduct her analysis of women's experience in *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye*.

Understanding the society's concept of an ideal feminine image is crucial to the comprehension of the actions of Atwood's heroines since it shaped the lives of both the author and her characters. Marian and Elaine are approximately of the same age and exposed to the same concept of femininity. This concept with its numerous deficiencies is probably the most thoroughly examined by Betty Friedan in her *Feminine Mystique* published in 1963, which Atwood admitted to have read at the time of writing *The Edible Woman*.

During the fifties a powerful image of an ideal woman appeared; a supportive and loyal housewife living vicariously and selflessly through her husband and her children. This image echoed the Victorian notion of a perfect woman, who was confined to her home because she could not obtain the same education and training as men and this lack of competence disabled her from competing with men in any field of activity outside her home; she was literally forced by her incompetence to live the life of an inferior, protected and self-sacrificing wife. O'Neill observes that in return for her actual inferiority the Victorian woman was being elevated to a position of "the chaste Mother-Priestess" (6) who "was morally and spiritually superior to man because of her highly developed intuition, refined sensibilities, and especially because of her life-giving maternal powers which defied



man's comprehension" (7). It might seem as a mystery that even though a woman in the fifties, unlike her Victorian predecessor, enjoyed the achievements of the First Wave of feminism; the right to vote, the right to dispose of her own property as well as wide access to education, she still remained confined to her home. Friedan described "the happy housewife heroine" of the fifties as follows:

The suburban housewife - she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife - freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of (18).

The modern woman of the fifties seemed to be ideally equipped to enter the challenging world of men having the shining example set by the emancipated women before the Second World War; yet she willingly turned to seeking her happiness and self-fulfilment in the household. One might ask what were the reasons for such a startling move. Friedan supplies ample evidence that the solid chains which bound the housewives to their homes again were tempered coincidentally out of the ingenious mixture comprising the popular Freudian theories together with the social sciences based on Freud's findings, education directed towards the understanding and adjustment to the truly feminine role, as well as the postwar need for love and security traditionally represented by the family

with the caring mother at the centre and last, but certainly not least, the interests of the market reinforced by the massive influence of the media. These ingredients melt down into impervious and powerful chains, which fastened millions of women to the Procrustean bed of, what Friedan called, "feminine mystique".

The modern women were neither regarded inferior to men nor were they seen as immaculate embodiment of virtues; instead they were offered a respectable post of "a full and equal partner to man" (Friedan 18) represented by the image of the happy housewife, which grew so strong and plausible that great numbers of women, fell prey to the myth of this modernized Angel in the House. This ideal image was widely accepted and rarely questioned as O'Neill remarks, "[it] was the best of time for women just the same, everyone assured them, because they were able to realize their social and biological destinies under ideal circumstances. Judging by the lack of complaints, most women seemed to agree" (309-310).

Ironically, many women who were living such a dream life found themselves strangely discontented, excessively tired and drained of enthusiasm. In her study, Friedan was trying to detect the reasons for the growing dissatisfaction among those American women who seemed to enjoy everything a woman needed to be happy according to the publicly cherished image. She drew the public attention to the fact that there were increasing numbers of women who were not content when they kissed their husbands good bye, drove their children to school, or when they were changing their immaculate bedsheets, or vacuum cleaned the living room. Even though they possessed everything they had once desired

they seemed to be missing some piece in their wonderful life puzzle. Friedan started an extensive research interviewing women about their lives and one of the most frequent responses she obtained was as follows: "The problem is always being the children's mommy, or [my husband's] wife and never being myself" (28). This answer reminds one disquietingly of another Atwood's novel; *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>2</sup> where the handmaids are given names of their masters such as Offred or Ofwarren and their only task is to breed the children for the system threatened with extinction.

One might wonder what kind of power dictates the women their role and what keeps them in their inferior position. Molly Hite in her essay *Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye* suggests that the power exercised over Atwood's heroines corresponds to the concept of power in the modern disciplinary society as described by Foucault. "In such a society, power is dissociated, diffuse, and pervasive; as such, it is internalized, and thus self-policing" (Foucault qtd. in Hite, 141). Even though Marian and Elaine both experience the devastating effects of the disciplinary power on their identity, their references to the sources of this power are scarce and often vague which matches Foucault's description.

When Marian ponders her future career in Seymour Surveys she finds herself being limited by the fact that she can never "become one of the men upstairs" (*The Edible Woman* 20) The furthest career progress she can expect is

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<sup>2</sup> Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 inspired by her trip to Afghanistan.

the position of the head of the department which "deals primarily with housewives" so "everyone in it, except the unfortunate office-boy, is female" (*The Edible Woman* 20). However, even this slight step on the career ladder would take a long time and Marian is in doubt whether it would be worth the effort. When she further confesses that she has "caught glimpses of [the executives'] offices" (*The Edible Woman* 19) it sounds almost apologetically and brings into one's mind the idea of Bentham's "Panopticon"; an architectural model of the disciplinary society where, "[each] individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see (...)" (Bentham qtd. in Foucault 200). Similarly when Elaine contemplates her life on her retrospective return to Toronto she remarks, "Most of the time though I exult, and think I have had a narrow escape" (*Cat's Eye* 15) but she does not specify from what she escaped because as the object of the disciplinary surveillance she is not supposed to identify the threatening supervisors.

Even though the disciplinary society, as presented by Foucault exercises its powerful mechanism of constant surveillance to ensure that everyone occupies a precisely allotted position, performs assigned tasks and strives to conform to the prescribed norm, it cannot entirely eliminate what O'Neill describes as a "discrepancy between [society's] professed aims and its real ones," (6). As he further remarks "ideology and actuality never correspond exactly" (6) and when the split between the two becomes too wide it may lead to resistance, or even civil war.

During the fifties the tension between the established role model of the suburban housewife and the frustrated ambitions of these women grew to such extent that it was impossible to ignore it any longer. Yet for the supposedly happy housewives it was not easy to concede the existence of "the problem", as Friedan called the conflict, for the women were constantly reminded of how privileged they were; being freed from the hard work at home and the rat race outside their homes. When it was made visible by, for example, the publication of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* or de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1960s it raised a great surge of derision from the propagators of the feminine mystique. Some, as for instance *New York Times*, ridiculed the whole matter by attributing women's discontent to the "incompetent appliance repairmen" (qtd. in Friedan 22) others regarded the matter more seriously and suggested that the core of the problem was too much education the women were receiving. Another reporter from the *New York Times* in June 1960 even admitted that: "Many young women - certainly not all - whose education plunged them into a world of ideas feel stifled in their homes. They find their routine lives out of joint with their training. Like shut-ins, they feel left out" (qtd. in Friedan 22).

Innumerable experts started to suggest possible solutions to the problem ranging from providing women with "more realistic preparation for their housewife role, such as

high-school workshops in home appliances" (Friedan 23)<sup>3</sup> to such a drastic one as prohibition of women's access to the colleges and universities. So deeply entrenched was the conception of the perfect housewife and so many renowned authorities supported the image that many women did not even dare to question it and instead they were trying to adjust to it whatever the cost. Friedan investigated the sources that fuelled the potent "feminine mystique" making it extraordinarily compact and resistant to any transformation. Such an investigation required heroic effort as the ideal feminine image of that time was a very complex issue and even the housewives themselves were reluctant to acknowledge its limitations as Friedan recorded:

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off (31).

Here Friedan's explanation corresponds with Foucault's notion of disciplinary society where the objects of power internalise the norm to such extent that they are unable to question it or disobey the rules. It seems most disconcerting that, unlike Woolf and her contemporaries, the women in the fifties were no longer able to identify "the gates, the locks and bolts that were being set upon the freedom of their minds". Friedan maintains that the girls and women who were indoctrinated

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<sup>3</sup> Atwood herself "[...] abandoned that pursuit [writing] after a couple of years in favour of plans for a career in home economics [...]" (Kibble 2005).

by the feminine mystique were refused the right to grow up and were frozen in their development by conforming to the identity prescribed to them by the prominent scientists and zealous experts. Initially, the smooth adjustment to the feminine role with "the help" of the education and persistent media manipulation seemed to be the appropriate and only choice. However, this decision bore its inevitable ramifications:

[...] [By] choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, by never achieving the hard core of self that comes not from fantasy but from mastering reality, these girls are doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, non-existence, non-involvement with the world that can be called *anomie*, or lack of identity, or merely felt as the problem that has no name" (Friedan 181).

Nevertheless, there was yet another choice more painful and not enjoying the public popularity but still open. It was a choice which was unbecoming to a woman making her look less feminine and somewhat suspicious; this choice permitted her "the experiences, the testing, the failures and successes in various spheres of activity that [were] necessary for a person to achieve full maturity, individual identity" (Friedan 180). A woman who decided for this option must have been a strong persona already to resist the enormous pressure that the society exerted upon her as she had very few role models available to support her decision and had to become a pioneer herself. Friedan explains the position of career women in the postwar society as follows:

The only other kind of women I knew, growing up, were the old-maid high-school teachers; the librarian; the one woman doctor in our town, who cut her hair

like a man; and a few of my college professors. None of these women lived in the warm center of life as I had known it at home. Many had not married or had children. (...) I never knew a woman, when I was growing up, who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children (75).

Marian's boss, Mrs. Bogue, can be interpreted as an example of "the other kind" of women who decided to build their career instead of immersing themselves in the minute details of family life. She is loyal to Seymour Surveys and manages her department in an uncompromising manner from her separate Panopticon-like cubicle. It is not only this physical separation that distinguishes her from the rest of her flock. It is known that in the office she prefers "her girls to be either unmarried or seasoned veterans with their liability to unpredictable pregnancies well in the past" (*The Edible Woman* 168), because she "regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company" (*The Edible Woman* 24). Her preference of such "unfeminine" values together with her restrained behaviour after the official announcement of Marian's wedding bespeak her critical attitude towards the ideals of the feminine mystique. In the relaxed atmosphere at the Christmas office party Mrs. Bogue even permits herself to recollect mistily "a memory, fast fading to legend, of a time when the office party had been a company-wide event" when "the men from upstairs had come down and they even had drinks" (*The Edible Woman* 162), making allusions to the times when she could freely build her career without being excluded from "the warm center of life" (Friedan 75). In the concept of feminine mystique she is allowed to hold the minor managerial position yet it is redeemed by social exclusion and so Mrs. Bogue is often found "[standing] aside [...] at the rim of the circle" (*The Edible Woman* 168).



Elaine's chances to meet some emancipated women are even slimmer than Marian's. To some extent Elaine's mother can be considered emancipated; even though she does not pursue a professional career, she clearly rejects the idea of making household the entire centre of her life. She appears blissfully disrespectful of household chores, which the feminine mystique elevated to the meaning of a housewife's life. After meeting the mothers of her friends Elaine reflects:

My mother is not like the other mothers, she doesn't fit in with the idea of them. She does not inhabit the house, the way the other mothers do; she's airy and hard to pin down. The others don't go skating on the neighbourhood rink, or walk in the ravine by themselves. They seem to me grown up in a way that my mother is not (156).

Unconventional Mrs. Risley refuses to acknowledge housework either as a fulfilling or prestigious matter and therefore can hardly be respected by the conforming mothers but she "doesn't give a hoot" (214) about their opinion and, unlike her daughter, does not strive to meet the norm with which she cannot identify. Elaine feels irritated by such irresponsibility but, at the same time, she "would like to cultivate" the same "irreverent carelessness" (*Cat's Eye* 214) which she nevertheless describes as a luxury. Mrs. Risley's, similarly as Mrs. Bogue's ignorance of the happy housewife norm is registered but kindly tolerated because they are portrayed as harmless disoriented relics living in the bygone past "in the days when managing was enough" (*Cat's Eye* 395).

Nevertheless, the feminine mystique could not content with "just managing". Friedan suggests that the housewives, adopting the care for their homes and family as their exclusive mission, assailed the tedious housework with great enthusiasm loading the uninspiring chores with noble meanings to justify that the occupation of a housewife was equal to any other. According to Friedan's survey, the results of permanent undertaking of tasks well below their actual abilities included among others fatigue, listlessness, boredom and the feeling of emptiness and uselessness. Great numbers of housewives denied the argument that the housework itself can hardly represent *raison d'etre* for an educated and active woman of the twentieth century and attempted to overcome these doubts by multiplication of their domestic duties which left them even more exhausted and frustrated. Their vigorous efforts only verified the validity of Parkinson's Law that "Work Expands to Fill the Time Available" (Parkinson qtd. in Friedan 239) and left them "prostrate after a day of doubt anxiety and toil" (Parkinson) with the same feelings of hopelessness and misgivings about their future.

Both Atwood's characters Marian and Elaine, when contemplating their future, find themselves being pressed into the Procrustean bed of the feminine mystique in which they have no desire to lie, however, their means of resistance are rather limited and their efforts to "grow up" prove often futile since innumerable sophisticated methods are deployed to lure them into the comfortable and gloriously feminine role of the immaculate suburban housewife.

## 2.2. The chains binding "docile bodies"

The processes of perpetual surveillance and manipulation as performed over Marian and Elaine correspond to Foucault's description of the processes functioning within the disciplinary society. Foucault develops the concept of "docile bodies", which he claims to be essential for the functioning of the disciplinary, capitalist society. "The body as object and target of power" is first individualized and thus can be easily "manipulated, shaped, trained, [...] [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (Foucault 136). The heroines' bodies become objects and targets of power and both Marian and Elaine feel uncomfortable about their femaleness which renders them susceptible to feminine mystique.

Marian realizes the significance of her body at the women-only Christmas office party where she "examine[s] the women's bodies with interest, critically, as though she ha[s] never seen them before" (*The Edible Woman* 167), and for a while finds herself overwhelmed by a discovery that "[w]omen's edges are uncertain and their self-definition blurred" (Deery, 475). Marian ponders this characteristic feature of women's bodies, which she describes as "the continual flux between the outside and the inside" (*The Edible Woman* 167), as insinuating the instability of women's identity and its susceptibility to external influences. Deery further suggests that "[Atwood's] women characters [...] still mostly see themselves as men do, as fragments, as fetishized and commodified erotic parts" and "therefore fear self-

disintegration" (475) which evokes de Beauvoir's assertion claiming:

[f]or him she is sex - absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (Introduction, xliv-xlv).

It is at the party that Marian consciously recognizes the threat of disintegration, at the moment when she identifies with her colleagues she feels "suffocated by [the] thick sargasso-sea of femininity" (*The Edible Woman* 167) threatening to absorb her and she longs for "something solid, clear: a man" (*The Edible Woman* 167) to define her and unite her diffuse sense of self. She seeks refuge in her fiancé Peter, who has a clear vision of Marian's identity and does not hesitate to project it onto her.

Similarly, little Elaine and her friends regard the bodies of adult women with a mixture of curiosity and fright. Hite asserts that for the girls becoming a woman is loaded with ominous connotations which they are yet unable to comprehend. They observe the changes visible on the older girls realizing that, "[w]hatever has happened to them, bulging them, softening them, causing them to walk rather than run, as if there's some invisible leash around their necks, holding them in check - whatever it is, it may happen to us too" (*Cat's Eye* 93). Yet their desire to obtain the missing pieces of information from their mothers is frustrated because "[t]here's a great deal [the mothers] don't say [...] [s]o instead a long whisper runs among [the girls], from child to child, gathering horror" (*Cat's Eye* 94). Hite stresses that "[t]he anxiety attendant on achieving full feminine identity comes from the requirement

that the adult woman internalise a permanent belief in her need for improvement" (142). Marian and Elaine are always in the public eye and always feeling guilty of their defects as Elaine reflects:

I see that there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way. Even if you grow up, no matter how hard you scrub, whatever you do, there will always be some other stain or spot on your face or stupid act, somebody frowning (*Cat's Eye* 138).

"Docile bodies" conform to the norms set by society yet they hardly ever succeed in meeting the demanding requirements. They are consistently being assessed and hierarchized according to the degree of their identification with the norm. This is guaranteed by the constant surveillance performed first by the disciplinary institutions, especially by families and schools, and later, when the "bodies" "internalize the gaze of the [...] authority, [...] self-surveillance [becomes] part of their identity" (Hite, 141). The trained docile bodies with inbuilt self-policing mechanisms are then inserted into "complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical" and "which transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities (Foucault 148)." De Jong stresses that in Atwood's works the "female characters struggle to come to a definition of self, a self that is not dependent on men" (98) but their quest for identity is hindered by the mechanisms of disciplinary power which "is exercised by surveillance [...], by observation [...], by comparative measures that have the 'norm' as reference" (Foucault 193). The disciplinary gaze ensures that the heroines follow the "norm" and at the same time

serves to prevent them from possible deviances. In *The Edible Woman* Marian feels repeatedly threatened by the "gaze of power" (Hobgood, 151) and similarly in *Cat's Eye* "the subjects who are most evidently singled out for enforced visibility are female" (Hite, 141).

Foucault further maintains that "[a] meticulous observation of detail, and at the same time a political awareness of the small things" are employed by the disciplinary society "for the control and use of men" (Foucault 141). Hobgood and Hite both assert that in the North American society of the fifties and early sixties the same mechanism was adopted "for the control and use of women". Throughout, *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye*, Atwood pays great attention to details which help the reader uncover a refined net of minute everyday coercions exercised over the heroines ensuring their docility. In *The Edible Woman* "Atwood renders [the scenes] with plentiful images of hunting and capture" (Hobgood, 152) as well as with vivid food imagery which Parker identifies as "a metaphor for power"; in her interpretation, eating represents "an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men (Parker, 349)". In *Cat's Eye* De Jong identifies the main theme of Atwood's novels as "the vision and perception, the art of looking and the art of being seen" (de Jong, 98). Hite, in her work goes even further when she claims that "[as] these details amass, they reinforce the imputation that growing up female, even growing up as a white, middle-class female in a relatively prosperous North American country, is different only in degree from living in a police state" (Hite, 138).

Marian and Elaine find themselves subjected to the same concept of femininity, both feel handicapped by their docile bodies and both are perpetually being watched for possible deviations from the glorified norm, which they perceive as unfairly inhibitive to their ambitions. They employ different strategies in order to escape the prescribed feminine identity with which they cannot longer identify and at the same time they strive to determine a subjectivity of their own. The aim of the next chapters is to examine the particular ways in which the power is exercised over the heroines and analyse and compare the liberating strategies of both women characters as well as the effects of such endeavours on their further existence.

### **2.3. Entering the power system**

Marian and Elaine are part of the same capitalist society but they enter its economic and power system under very distinct conditions. Marian finds her existence in the system natural as she has always been its smoothly functioning part. She is used to operating in it by means of her traditional upbringing as well as by means of her job in a market research company which Hobgood labels as "a particularly seedy mechanism of capitalism" (149). Marian is used to living under the vigilant gaze of the social system, epitomizing perfect docile body. Unlike Marian, Elaine enters the system at the age of nine when her family settles down in a square-shaped [...] bungalow built of yellow brick" (*Cat's Eye* 32) on the suburbs of Toronto. Hite points out that at the moment their nomadic family becomes attached to a permanent place, they are

rendered visible to the normalizing and hierarchizing institutional gaze (141). When Elaine's family moves into their new house in Toronto she comments on it: "I feel trapped. I want to be back in the motel, back on the road, in my old rootless life of impermanence and safety" (*Cat's Eye* 33) as if she is aware of the perils of socialization awaiting her.

The institution of nuclear family is fundamental to the functioning of the whole disciplinary society. The nuclear family goes beyond its primary task of plain reproduction; it represents means of spatial distribution of individuals, which Foucault defines as one of the prerequisites of the disciplinary society. Hite maintains that by enclosing the subjects in the single-family house, the society secures the clear visibility of every single individual and the family thus becomes an elementary unit, which Hobgood qualifies as "the site for reproduction of Oedipus" (151), "producing and interpellating more docile workers" (148). Hite asserts that in the suburban communities it is the mother who is bound to the house and "who is supposed to occupy [it] continually" (141) reverberating the Freudian idea that a woman should gaily yet painstakingly "turn a house into a paradise" (Freud qtd. in Friedan 110).

Elaine's mother fails to fulfil the Freudian ideal as she never acknowledges the housework as the only meaning of her life. When the Risleys move into their new unfinished house Elaine's mother wastes the opportunity to "turn [the] house into a paradise" (Freud qtd. in Friedan, 110) and instead of performing the expected task herself urges the whole family "to pitch in" (*Cat's Eye* 32). Elaine also



uncomfortably confesses that it is her father who buys the household equipment as well as her mother's clothes, while she dismisses it lightly claiming that, "all her taste is in her mouth" (*Cat's Eye* 213). Mrs. Risley does not move with the times, ignores the ideals of feminine mystique and attends classes of ice-dancing and enjoys walks in the ravines by herself as if she still lived in the pre-war era. Her nonconformity differentiates her from the adjusted mothers and makes her look irresponsible and "urchin-like" (*Cat's Eye* 239). While failing to conform to the image of the happy housewife Elaine's eccentric mother also fails to introduce her daughter to the basic principles of "a whole world of girls and their doings" (*Cat's Eye* 54) and so Elaine's socialization "is left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh" (*Cat's Eye* 47).

In contrast to Elaine, Marian's socialization bears clear signs of "normality". Though Atwood's dosage of information on Marian's family background is rather scarce even from this thin evidence one can gather that Marian comes from a small town, middle class, traditional family professing the values of feminine mystique. The family allows certain reservations about "the effects of her university education" which are "never stated but always apparent" (*The Edible Woman* 174) fearing that after graduation she "[will] turn into a high-school teacher or a maiden aunt [...] or a female executive" (*The Edible Woman* 174). Even though after her studies at the college Marian claims she has estranged from her family's conservative values and started an independent existence as a clerk with a market research company, she still shares more with her family than she is willing to concede. She

prides herself on her independency and liberal views but in fact she is already tightly bound by the fetters of social convention and prone to accept implicitly the values that have been revered by the society.

Marian's fiancé Peter whom she describes in terms of "ordinariness raised to perfection" (*The Edible Woman* 61) further reinforces the gender stereotypes which Marian embraced at home. From her inferior position she allows him to project onto her his interpretation of ideal woman and Marian can consequentially see herself "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" Coming from a provincial town, used to living under permanent observation, it is close to impossible for her to deviate from the strictly set behavioural patterns. Therefore she finds it natural to comply with Peter's notion of herself as well as with the rules she has "no interest in and no part in making" (*The Edible Woman* 21) and "simply" adjusts to the situation. For instance she finds it easier to respect the importunate demands of her sanctimonious landlady than Ainsley, Marian's energetic roommate, who, in Marian's words:

doesn't come from a small town as I do, so she's not as used to people being snoop; on the other hand she's not as afraid of it either. She has no idea about the consequences (*The Edible Woman* 14).

The consequences that Marian mentions follow every disregard of the conventions and represent a powerful lever in the mechanics of the economic and social power system of the late fifties and early sixties. Marian is well aware of the fact that if a woman does not abide by the strict rules defining her femininity she might be jeopardising her

position in what Friedan calls "the warm center of life" (Friedan 75). Moreover, Marian firmly believes that "life isn't run by principles but by adjustments" (*The Edible Woman* 102) which echoes the continual confrontation of an individual with the norm in the disciplinary society as described by Foucault and the conviction of many experts of that time, reported by Friedan, that if a modern woman wants to be happy she "only" has to accept and adjust to her exclusive role of a housewife. Marian regards the society's rules as the only irrefutable truth and even though she sometimes senses their absurdity she does not dare to question them but obeys them dutifully and, in return, is deemed a reasonable and respectable member of the society as the following passage illustrates:

I suspect she's [the landlady] decided Ainsley isn't respectable, whereas I am. It's probably the way we dress: Ainsley says I choose clothes as though they're a camouflage or a protective colouration, though I can't see anything wrong with that. Se herself goes for neon pink (*The Edible Woman* 14).

It is Ainsley who initiates Marian's identity crisis. Marian, though admitting to have certain doubts about her career, feels on the whole happy and normal at least until she has a perturbing discussion with Ainsley about her plan to have an illegitimate child. Marian's parochial sense of morality is deeply shocked and she is trying to discourage Ainsley from such an irresponsible and eccentric action insinuating possible problems claiming that "since the society is the way it is" (*The Edible Woman* 42) Ainsley as a single mother is going to encounter numerous obstacles. Nonetheless, Ainsley, influenced by the anthropological works which she studied at her college, is convinced that: "Every woman should have at least one

baby," (*The Edible Woman* 40-41) because "[i]t fulfills [her] deepest femininity" (*The Edible Woman* 41) but she does not intend to seek the security of the wedlock which leaves Marian exasperated. In response to Marian's well-meant conservative warnings Ainsley consents that "the society is the way it is" but she dares to propose an audacious idea that somebody has to "lead the way" (*The Edible Woman* 42) trying to challenge the stereotypes and bravely assails this intricate task herself.

Marian regards herself modern, educated and in her own words "more understanding than most" (*The Edible Woman* 42) and feels therefore offended when Ainsley exposes her as a bourgeois prude. However, Ainsley is capable of seeing what Marian cannot or maybe does not want to see. She has been steadily and unquestioningly internalizing the stereotypes of the feminine mystique and continually adjusting her behaviour in accordance with the norm for so long that she has lost the ability to assess the reality objectively without being prejudiced. Her university friend Clara even goes as far as declaring Marian "abnormally normal" (*The Edible Woman* 206) referring to Marian's complete and unquestioning identification with the norm. Ainsley, scandalously dares to flout the authorities and thus challenges the popular concept of the happy housewife shattering the very foundations of Marian's adjusted identity. The impact of Ainsley's decision on Marian is so strong that she starts feeling "fuzzy in the brain" and "unsettled" (*The Edible Woman* 43) and begins to deconstruct her existing values.

Unlike Marian, Elaine does not fulfil any of the preconditions for being regarded either reasonable or respectable. Throughout her early childhood she is spared the social influence of the closed suburban community; as a daughter of a field entomologist she spends first eight years of her life mostly cruising the countryside with her family living in motels or tents having no permanent home and being subject to no permanent social formation like Marian. Elaine recalls that period as follows: "[...] we didn't really live anywhere; or we lived so many places it was hard to remember them" (*Cat's Eye* 21) or elsewhere she wonders: "How long did we live this way, like nomads on the far edges of the war?" (*Cat's Eye* 25).

The only people to shape Elaine's world are her nonconformist parents, together with her bright and studious older brother Stephen. As a result, Elaine floats through her early childhood utterly oblivious of the freshly burgeoning seeds of the feminine mystique and completely unaware of the society's gender restrictions. Yet she is to be taught her lesson and, as she has not had the opportunity to produce enough "antidote", this lesson is going to be an agonizing one. Forty years later when Elaine returns to Toronto for her retrospective exhibition she recapitulates those days tersely: "Until we moved to Toronto I was happy" (*Cat's Eye* 21).

Moving to Toronto becomes rather traumatizing milestone in Elaine's life. She sees the world with an utterly different pair of eyes from Marian's, which is partly due to her family's migratory way of life as they never stop at any place long enough for Elaine to absorb

the stereotypes, and partly due to her exceptional mother who does not manage to instruct her on the principles determining the woman's role in the post-war society. Elaine's future social skills have been influenced by her close relationship with her older brother Stephen, for eight years her only peer and confidante, as well as by the fact that her parents did not raise Elaine differently from him as it was usual at that time. Such experience, together with the anti-consumerism attitude and liberal views encouraged in the family, made Elaine inevitably a rare anomaly; a blank page, which in the era of strictly normalized behaviour drew the attention of numerous guardians of propriety and decorum eager to impress the "normal" values on Elaine's unsuspecting mind.

Whereas Marian is being fitted into the Procrustean bed of feminine mystique gradually, Elaine tumbles into it unexpectedly innocent of the scheming employed for her transformation. The process of Marian's "normalization" is a long-term one and as such also bound to be more successful. Marian, as a typical end product of the disciplinary society, is not capable of discerning the defects of the system; under the constant observation she becomes a self-policing individual with internalised set of stereotypes which ensures that she occupies her particular position in the society. She thus becomes a dependable elementary building block of the capitalist society; the docile body functioning "as little more than a machine" (Hobgood 149). For Elaine the process of transformation is unanticipated and complicated by the fact that unlike Marian, she has already internalised a set of values which is completely different from the concept of the social system she is about to enter.

However, Elaine does not escape the attention of the system completely. Among the strongest formative instruments of society, education remains one of the most prominent. Primers represent the first sources of knowledge introducing social conventions to the child's mind. For little Elaine who knows nothing about the conventional way of life the stories in her primer "have an exotic appeal" (*Cat's Eye* 29) introducing her to the generally approved ideal of the world where people:

live in a white house with ruffled curtains, a front lawn, and a picket fence. The father goes to work, the mother wears a dress and an apron, and the children play ball on the lawn with their dog and cat. [...] The children are always clean, and the little girl, whose name is Jane, wears pretty dresses and patent-leather shoes with straps (*Cat's Eye* 29).

Through the stories in her primer the feminine mystique first appeals to little Elaine presenting her with the idealized examples of suburban life sowing thus the viable seeds of inadequacy into Elaine's mind. The image of a model family as described in this book is presented as the only possible ideal and reinforced by the authority of written text. The stories have deep impact on Elaine's notion of herself. She senses the deficiencies of her own family life and idolizes the model offered by the primer. It occurs to her that until now she has not had any permanent girl friends and she longs for such a friendship but at the same time she is painfully aware of her own deviation from the ideal and starts considering herself inferior. It is here where could be placed the beginning of Elaine's need to be accepted, to be

popular. It stems from "[...] the elegant, delicate picture [she has] in [her] mind, about other little girls" (*Cat's Eye* 29) and the desire to bear favourable comparison with them. Elaine is so bewildered by examining the exterior of the girls in the pictures and confronting them with herself spotted by her innumerable defects that in her imagination she never proceeds as far as even speaking to them: "I don't think about what I might say to them if I actually met some. I haven't got that far" (*Cat's Eye* 29).

Soon after she moves to Toronto Elaine starts going to school where she first learns about the society's gender restrictions. Elaine discovers that she has to wear skirts to school and enter the building through the "grandiose entranceways with carvings around them and ornate insets above the doors, inscribed in curvy, solemn lettering: GIRLS and BOYS" (*Cat's Eye* 45) which baffles her and leaves her wondering, "[h]ow is going in through a door different if you're a boy?" (*Cat's Eye* 46). However, she accepts the new rules detaches herself from the assuring presence of her older brother and comments on her position as follows:

So I am left to the girls, real girls at last, in the flesh. But I'm not used to girls, or familiar with their customs. I feel awkward around them, I don't know what to say. I know the unspoken rules of boys, but with girls I sense that I am always on the verge of some unforeseen, calamitous blunder (*Cat's Eye* 47).

To Elaine's relief she is befriended by her classmate Carol Campbell; a prototype of sweet conforming girl resembling Jane from Elaine's primer, who readily initiates her into the world of the white middle class society revealing her



the importance of appearance and possessions. Osborne suggests that Carol finds Elaine bizarre because of her ignorance of "the material trappings of middle class culture" (para, 21) such as twin sets, dressing gowns, cold waves, pageboy haircuts and Eaton catalogues and prides herself on educating Elaine in the field of economic and social relations enhancing thus her own social status (Osborne, para 22). Carol's behaviour corresponds with Hite's assertion that women in the modern disciplinary society are haunted by the idea of their imperfection requiring perpetual striving to improve themselves which is mitigated by the fact "that [they] can also [...] police other women and female children" (Hite, 142). In this sense Carol is allowed to school Elaine, yet she herself is subjected to similar training from her friend Grace Smeath whom Hite describes as "[t]he most successful product of female socialization among the girls" (Hite, 142).

The girls seize the opportunity to preach Elaine on the stereotypes of the middle class society because it gives them the satisfactory feeling of superiority, which they, as members of marginalized group, do not enjoy very often. Elaine, having been starved of friendship with the girls for nine years, holds her new friends in high esteem and is readily willing to sacrifice her old habits and embrace the ones impressed on her by them. She soon recognizes her many imperfections regarding herself as "an imitation of a girl" (*Cat's Eye* 52) but determines to abandon her old habits and judging from the gender-enforcing games she plays with Grace and Carols arrives to the naïve conclusion that to become a part of "a whole world of girls and their doings that has been unknown to [her]" (*Cat's Eye* 54) she will only need to learn

the expectations of the society and behave accordingly even though she does not agree with them.

While Marian makes acquaintance with the norm at an early age and her acceptance of the concept of feminine mystique is further reinforced by her conservative upbringing and later by schooling and her relationship with conservative and authoritative boyfriend, Elaine first encounters the norm at the age of nine and her desired identification with the public image of ideal woman is hampered by her liberal upbringing and ignorance of the gender stereotypes. Elaine shares with Marian her position "of being subject to rules [she has] no interest in and no part in making" (*The Edible Woman* 21) but whereas Marian defines herself with reference to men, namely her fiancé Peter, Elaine's identity is formed by her girl friends. Both heroines are caught in the power struggle, loathing their position of the powerless, observed and perennially normalized bodies and launch into liberating themselves from the strictly defined category of femininity.

#### **2.4. Escaping the gaze of the Watchbirds**

In both novels Atwood succeeds in detailed examination of seeing and being seen dyad. De Jong in her essay exposes "Atwood's complex use of eye and mirror imagery" (98) demonstrating:

a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible" (Foucault 170-171).

Both women characters experience what Hite characterizes as "a rigorous separation of seeing from being seen" (139) which she claims to be the essential quality of the postwar definitions of masculinity and femininity (139). Hite further suggests that "[for] women, to be seen is both to have an identity and to be identified as vulnerable: both a requirement and a stigma" (139). In accord with this assertion Marian and Elaine realize the unceasing presence of the judgmental gaze which assigns them their identity and at the same time renders them vulnerable and they feel anxious about being the objects of constant observation, assessment and normalization. De Jong stresses that it is the "vision and perception, the art of looking and the art of being seen" (98) that is central to the heroines' "struggle to come to a definition of self, a self that is not dependent on men" (98), and in Elaine's case, a self that is not dependent on women.

The personal level of the disciplinary gaze is intensified by the magazines and advertisements, written and created mostly by men (Friedan 54), reinforcing the public image of a "young and frivolous, almost childlike [housewife]; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies, and home" (Friedan 36). When Marian flips through some magazines in her living room offering her useful tips on issues of adoption, real love and honeymoon tensions (*The Edible Woman* 90) she is highly likely to come across the admonishing figure of the Watchbird whom Elaine finds in magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *Chatelaine* and whom Hite defines as "an icon of the one-way gaze, directed initially at pictures that 'show women doing things they aren't supposed to do,' but who then [turns]

outward, toward the female reader saying: 'This is a Watchbird watching YOU' (142). In Hite's view the figure of the Watchbird<sup>4</sup> is "explicitly corrective" yet at the same time it implies that correction is impossible and the women "are fighting a losing battle" which corresponds with Foucault's concept of the docile bodies (142). Both heroines find themselves being carefully watched for possible deviations from the norm the difference being that Marian is surveyed mainly by her boyfriend and Elaine policed by her girl friends.

Marian is defined with reference to Peter, her authoritative boyfriend, echoing de Beauvoir's thesis that she is the incidental, the inessential Other as opposed to the essential Absolute figure of the man (Introduction, xliv). Peter's taste in good-sized solid things in perfect condition (*The Edible Woman* 58) bespeak his conservative values, typical of the middle class society, for which he appeals to Marian. In terms of feminine mystique she believes that for her "Peter is an ideal choice" (*The Edible Woman* 102) as he represents "ordinariness raised to perfection" (*The Edible Woman* 61) "something solid, clear" (*The Edible Woman* 167) and he is also an attractive and neat man who is "bound to be successful" (*The Edible Woman* 102) and therefore able to protect her and provide for her and their prospective family. Marian accepts Peter as the ultimate authority, arranges her life according to his plans and beliefs and is always looking up to him for approval. Through his fatherly domination she identifies with his vision of her to such extent that when she sees them in the mirror of

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<sup>4</sup> For illustration of the Watchbird see Appendix 2

the elevator she comments on it: "I [am] just about the right height for him" (*The Edible Woman* 65).

Even though after her disquieting conversation about Ainsley's liberal views on marriage Marian feels "unsettled" about the concept of femininity as presented by the feminine mystique, in the assuring presence of Peter she lightly discharges Ainsley's reservations and dutifully adjusts to his stereotype of a sensible woman who will not "try to take over his life" (*The Edible Woman* 61). Until the evening out with Peter, Len and Ainsley Marian happily abides by her boyfriend's vision of her ignoring Ainsley's remarks about Peter's monopolizing her (*Edible Woman*, 32). Nothing indicates that Marian is aware of the disciplinary gaze exercised over her by Peter. Hobgood attributes Marian's awakening to the threatening gaze of power to the overwhelming impact of the hunting story as told by Peter (151) when Marian visualizes the hunting scene as follows:

I saw it as though it was a slide projected on a screen in a dark room, the colours luminous, green, brown, blue for the sky, red. Peter stood with his back to me in a plaid shirt, his rifle slung on his shoulder. A group of his friends, those friends whom I had never met, were gathered around him, their faces clearly visible in the sunlight that fell in shafts down through the anonymous trees, splashed with blood, the mouths wrenched with laughter. I couldn't see the rabbit (*The Edible Woman* 69).

She identifies with the rabbit, recognizes herself as an object of powerful disciplinary observation embodied here by Peter and loses control over herself first breaking helplessly into tears and later breaking into run hoping to escape the threatening gaze. However, Peter and Len, as

representatives of the dominating gender, hunt and finally capture Marian teaching her a lesson that making a spectacle of herself "is neither to be tolerated nor is it effective for her in the social field" (Hobgood, 152). Before Marian escapes she tries to police herself: "Get a grip on yourself" and "[don't] make a fool of yourself" (*The Edible Woman* 70) trying to prevent herself from the irrational and public break down. Her behaviour reflects Hite's assertion that "the female object of the look is also somehow guilty of it and thus susceptible as a consequence of her own instigation" (139). Marian experiences strong feelings of guilt after she is captured and longs for Peter's forgiveness. She learns that running away as liberating strategy is useless since not only is making a scene classified as an "unforgivable sin" (*The Edible Woman* 72) because it is too public but it also intensifies the focus of the gaze.

As the evening proceeds in the privacy of Len's apartment Marian attempts another strategy and soon finds herself "wedged sideways between the bed and the wall out of sight but not at all comfortable" (*The Edible Woman* 75) so she slips all the way under the bed where she feels autonomous; smug in the coolness and the solitude (*The Edible Woman* 76). Here she becomes aware of the necessity to face the reality and make a final decision about her future life. In the end Marian arrives at the conclusion to break away from Peter ignoring his gaze and feeling "considerably better" but unsure about her newly acquired freedom:

I [have] broken out; from what, or into what, I [don't] know. Though I [am not] at all certain why I [have] been acting this way, I [have] at least acted. Some kind of decision [has] been made, something [has]

been finished. After that violence, that overt and suddenly to me embarrassing display, there [can] be no reconciliation [...] (*The Edible Woman* 78-79).

Even though at first Marian's break seems final she later succumbs to Peter's "magnanimous gallantry" (*The Edible Woman* 78) and superiority expressed by "a forceful display of muscle" (*The Edible Woman* 81); allows herself "to be led to the car and inserted into the front seat" (*The Edible Woman* 80) and even though she is aware of his watching her; "his face strangely shadowed, his eyes gleaming like an animal's in the beam from a car headlight. His stare intent [...] faintly ominous" (*The Edible Woman* 82), she rejects the possibility to start a new insecure, independent existence freed from his policing gaze and votes for his forgiveness and security of the wedlock seeing herself "small and oval, mirrored in his eyes" (*The Edible Woman* 83).

After Peter's proposal<sup>5</sup> Marian notices that his voice sounds "as though [he's] just bought a shiny new car" (*The Edible Woman* 88) and witnesses his prompt metamorphosis "from a reckless young bachelor into a rescuer from chaos, a provider of stability" (*The Edible Woman* 89). He takes his new role seriously and after their engagement she notices that "he [has] been watching her more and more" (*Edible Woman*, 149). His observation, which Marian perceives as resembling the clinical doctor's examination, makes her uneasy and when she muses on

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, Peter proposes to Marian at the age of twenty-six, the same age when Sigmund Freud proposed to his future wife Martha. From the excerpts of Freud's letters to Martha as mentioned in Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (109-112) it seems that these two gentlemen share much more than just the age at which they proposed.

the possible reasons for his gaze she toys with the idea that:

[he is] seizing her up as he would a new camera, trying to find the central complex of wheels and tiny mechanisms, the possible weak points, the kind of future performance to be expected: the springs of the machine (*The Edible Woman* 150).

Peter occupies more and more of Marian's mind as she "ever eager to please" (*The Edible Woman* 281) strives to define and fit into his image of ideal woman. When she realizes, much to her horror, that he sees her in material terms of shiny new cars and sophisticated cameras enhancing his own social status the sensible part of her refuses to believe such "a violence of the mind" (*The Edible Woman* 151) yet the other part, which she denies any connection to her conscious mind, identifies her in material terms with the consumer goods and renders her susceptible to Peter's consumption. Consequentially, Marian associating herself with the food ready for consumption gradually refrains from eating to avoid cannibalism. As she suspects the threat of Peter's projecting his stereotype of ideal woman onto her, turning her into "edible woman" she evades, where possible, his gaze and especially his attempts to capture her, through the lenses of his camera, in the image of:

tiny two-dimensional small figure in a red dress, posed like a paper woman in a mail-order catalogue, turning and smiling, fluttering in the white empty space (*The Edible Woman* 243).

Whereas Marian finds herself being identified by her fiancé Peter, Elaine's identification is complicated by the fact that she struggles to comply with the ideal feminine image as projected onto her by her girl friends Carol, Grace



and Cordelia; each of them representing different notion of femininity. Carol epitomizes the image of powerless frivolous girl who establishes her identity on the material base, she is the one who, in accord with Friedan, "can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy [...] by the buying of things" (Friedan 208). Hence Carol's obsession with cold waves, twin sets, Chintz curtains, dressing gowns and Eaton's Catalogues which, as Osborne points out, enhance her social status (para 20). In contrary to Carol, Grace bases her identity on moral principles as professed by her religious old-fashioned and self-sacrificing mother. In the group of Elaine's friends Grace is the moral authority transcending Carol's material values. Hite defines Grace as "the most successful product of female socialization" (142) and as such she is admired by the girls; "Grace is [...] the desirable one, the one we all want" (*Cat's Eye* 96). From her superior position Grace subjects her friends to the strict judgemental gaze making them feel guilty and responsible for their imperfections. Elaine describes her as "quietly reproachful, as if her headache is our fault" (*Cat's Eye* 52).

However, it is Cordelia who becomes the most important formative figure in Elaine's life. From the very first time they meet Elaine feels strong affiliation towards Cordelia who reciprocates it and from the authority of her higher social status "creates a circle of two, takes [Elaine] in" (*Cat's Eye* 71). De Jong identifies their first meeting as the beginning of Elaine's life-long annihilating dependence on Cordelia's view and gaze (99). Cordelia cannot compare to her beautiful and talented older sisters but she makes great effort to keep up appearances

in fear of being labelled "disappointing" (*Cat's Eye* 73). Frustrated that she cannot accommodate the social expectations required in her family "Cordelia tries [...] to reverse the direction of the gaze" (Hite, 140). She is stigmatised by the constant surveillance performed over her and in attempt to liberate herself from the gaze she refocuses it in the direction of Elaine who, entirely innocent of gender restrictions, presents an easy outlet for Cordelia's frustrations.

Whereas Marian is confronted with the patriarchal gaze mainly straight through Peter, a member of the dominant gender, Elaine is subjected to the gaze of women acting as agents of the disciplinary system. Deery explains the difference as follows: "Atwood's male observers try to impose on women a definite and containable shape [...] to their liking" but:

[It] is difficult to say what women are without male observation: Women have always been women-as-observed-by-men [...]. Outside this observation, it is difficult to say what exists (476).

In accord with Deery's assertion, Peter projects his unequivocal vision of ideal woman onto Marian with self-assuring authority and handles her excesses with a little patronizing forgiveness, understanding and superior benevolence (*The Edible Woman* 82) while Elaine receives most of her training from Cordelia and her friends who project onto her their vague version of the feminine ideal riddled with mysterious connotations "gathering horror" (*Cat's Eye* 94). The girls know that they "can't ask [their] mothers" for explanation because between them there is "a gulf, an abyss, that goes down and down [...] filled with

wordlessness" (*Cat's Eye* 93). Under the omnipresent disciplinary gaze performed by other women they strive to fulfil an illusory ideal never being exactly sure what reflection they should mirror, which arouses feelings of incompetence followed by guilt and even self-contempt. Little Elaine realizes that she is not "measuring up" and "[she] will have to do better. But better at what?" (*Cat's Eye* 117). Marian experiences similar observation from her sanctimonious landlady which she describes as follows:

It was true she had never specifically forbidden us to do anything - that would be too crude a violation of her law of nuance - but this only makes me feel I am actually forbidden to do everything" (*The Edible Woman* 16).

In Elaine's words, women have "a tendency to exist" (*Cat's Eye* 242), aware of the ideal they can never match, always reminded by other women of their imperfections, they experience constant insecurity wishing to please and adjust to the vague image of perfect woman, at the same time knowing that it is impossible. To alleviate the stress of their own inadequacy, anxiety and powerlessness the girls "use [Elaine] as a scapegoat in order to displace their own suffering as members of a patriarchy, here literalized in the authority of their own fathers" (Hite, 137).

The power in the suburban society is strictly hierarchized; Elaine observes that on the very top of the hierarchy are "the fathers, with their real, unspeakable power" reinforced by Carol's whip marks (*Cat's Eye* 164) and Cordelia's father shouting upstairs (*Cat's Eye* 73), followed by the mothers who "rule the daytime" (*Cat's Eye*

164), the next level occupied by the girls like Grace and Carol who copy their mothers' behaviour and the lowest position belonging to Elaine who yet has to be subjected to tough drill to comply with the requirements. Cordelia's position in the hierarchy is ambiguous. Hite claims that she strives to appropriate for herself the power reserved for men who can "make you feel that what [they think] of you matters, because it will be accurate, but that what you think of [them] is of no importance" (*Cat's Eye* 249) and she succeeds in implementation of this feeling in Elaine who uncritically adopts Cordelia's distorted vision. Hite explains that Cordelia is painfully aware that unlike her Shakespearean namesake, will never manage to please her father (137) "because she is somehow the wrong person (*Cat's Eye* 249) and to assuage her feelings of guilt she attempts to transfer to Elaine her own father's expressions of contempt, "[wipe] that smirk off your face!" and "[what] do you have to say for yourself?" (*Cat's Eye* 171, 117).

Throughout her life in Toronto Elaine feels subjected to the devastating surveillance from her friends and, unconsciously copying Cordelia, develops strong feelings of guilt for her own inadequacy. Hite stresses that "[the] assumption that misfortune is necessarily 'the fault of what is wrong with' the person suffering it is intrinsic to the structure of the disciplinary society" (143). Elaine internalises the belief that she needs improvement and succumbs to her friends' continual observation followed by further exercise. Such conditions provide plenty of room for the feelings of culpability expressed by Elaine's self-accusing comments: "[w]hatever has happened to me is my own fault, the fault of what is wrong with me" (*Cat's Eye* 338)

and "[w]hat is happening to me is my own fault, for not having more backbone" (*Cat's Eye* 156) and by her physical self-mutilation when she bites her fingers or peels the skin off her feet.

The normalizing observation exercised over Elaine intensifies, she finds herself being continually watched, by Carol in the classroom and Grace in Sunday School, their findings dutifully reported to Cordelia, who as a final arbiter "holds the mirror up in front of [Elaine] and says, 'Look at yourself! Just look!' her voice is disgusted, fed up" (*Cat's Eye* 158) yet Cordelia's mirror fails to provide Elaine with the clear reflection of herself. Elaine can no longer stand the unstable position of the always assessed, corrected and disappointing figure in need of further improvement and as a self-defence strategy, adopts the qualities of her *Cat's Eye* marble and retreats "back into [her] eyes" in order to escape the pain caused by her friends (Hite, 143). De Jong assigns the marble "the unfeeling, distancing quality" (104) which Elaine appropriates to herself. To survive the terror of normalization she becomes "alive in [her] eyes only" (*Cat's Eye* 141) denying herself, "emptying [herself] of feeling" (*Cat's Eye* 154). After the incident, when Elaine nearly freezes in the ravine, she finally manages to completely detach herself from the power of her girl friends feeling that she is "indifferent to them. [with] something hard in [her], crystalline, a kernel of glass" (*Cat's Eye* 193). She liberates herself from the gaze at the cost of losing "both feeling and memories" walking around "symbolically amputated and dismembered" (de Jong, 105).

Whereas Marian merely hides from Peter's determining gaze finding herself incapable of self-definition without reference to the essential Absolute figure of the man, later trying to substitute Duncan, the liberal graduate student, for conservative Peter, Elaine adopts the art of returning the gaze and "holds on to her hard-earned status as someone who affects but remains unaffected" (Hite, 143). However, Hite emphasizes that Elaine manages to assert her new role only at the cost of her exclusion from the category "women"; denial of her female sex (140). Elaine makes use of her newly acquired ability to see in her painting profession, reserved mostly to men, and relishes the opportunity to watch and assess. When pondering her only picture of Cordelia called Half a Face it strikes her that: "I'm not afraid of seeing Cordelia. I'm afraid of being Cordelia. Because in some way we changed places and I've forgotten when" (*Cat's Eye* 227).

After the incident in the ravine Elaine obliterates her past, and as a teenager re-establishes her relationship with Cordelia; copying her strategy to liberate herself from the gaze, she refocuses it in Cordelia's direction and appropriates the power to see for herself. Now it is her who observes her friend, seeing her weaknesses, blaming her for the lack of willpower admonishing her to "[s]marten up" and "[p]ull up [her] socks" (*Cat's Eye* 258). When Cordelia tries to appease Elaine and explain why she bullied her when they were children, Elaine "hard-shelled, firmly closed" (*Cat's Eye* 201), realizes that:

[knowing] too much about other people puts you in their power, they have a claim on you, you are forced to understand their reasons for doing things and then you are weakened (*Cat's Eye* 217).

On this ground Elaine refuses to lose her newly acquired power by listening to Cordelia's motives feeling "dismayed by [herself], by [her] cruelty and indifference, [her] lack of kindness" (*Cat's Eye* 259) but at the same time relieved. Hite suggests that in the disciplinary society "mutilated self demands [...] a mutilated awareness of the other" to ensure the disproportion of power (145) and so Elaine stubbornly rejects learning more about people around her for fear that knowing their motives could upset her hardly acquired power. Elaine relishes being powerful not only in relation to Cordelia but also in relation to other women and applies to them the idea of "an eye for an eye" (*Cat's Eye* 388), which for her "is a deeply satisfying game" even though she cannot "account for [her] own savagery" (*Cat's Eye* 231).

Hite suggests that having acquired the ability to see and having disengaged herself from the limited category of women, Elaine reinforces her former assumption that "boys are [her] secret allies" (140). In the high school she reflects: "My relationships with boys are effortless" because "we're both looking for [...] escape" (*Cat's Eye* 237) and similarly in the evening drawing course Elaine expects to be accepted by the male painters and is treated "like an honorary boy" (*Cat's Eye* 307). Elaine consciously suppresses her femininity treating the girls at school, who "are already collecting china and housewares, and have Hope Chests", with "amused disdain" (*Cat's Eye* 235). She resolutely dedicates to her painting career "eliminating whatever does not fit in with it" (*Cat's Eye* 276) despising the ideal of feminine mystique, represented by the aimless girl students at the university, Elaine even trespasses on

the golden rule of controlling the way she looks and is deliberately "letting herself go" (*Cat's Eye* 277). She holds on to her independent image of a painter enjoying the power to see and, as Hite argues, "to fix bodies forever" in her paintings which does not emancipate her from the unmerciful principles of the disciplinary system but makes her one of its agents (148).

When middle-aged Elaine returns to Toronto for her retrospective exhibition not only does she review her paintings but also reconstructs her painful past. Looking at her picture, with an additional moustache drawn to it, on the poster in front of the gallery; described by Elaine as a "frightening [place, place] of evaluation, of judgement" (*Cat's Eye* 19), she discovers that she has finally achieved:

a face that a moustache can be drawn on, a face that attracts moustaches. A public face, a face worth defacing. [Which] is an accomplishment. [She has] made something of [herself], something or other, after all (*Cat's Eye* 20).

Here Elaine is yet unable to identify what she has made of herself because she is still afraid of acknowledging the mutilated image projected onto her by Cordelia, who still remains a powerful means of identification (de Jong, 100).

When Elaine contemplates her life she realizes that she is "supposed to be a person of substance" (*Cat's Eye* 13) but instead of feeling weightier she feels lighter, shrinking, missing what is lost. Osborne identifies Elaine's memories of the past, which she has repressed as



too painful, as the important missing part of her identity (para 11). At the opening of her exhibition Elaine hopes to meet her spiritual twin sister Cordelia in order to:

give her something you can never have, except from another person [...]. A reflection. This is the part of herself I could give back to her (*Cat's Eye* 411).

However Cordelia fails to appear, forcing Elaine to make the final step towards acknowledging her identity. Elaine returns to the bridge in the ravine where she was abandoned to believe in her own "nothingness" and the feelings of her "wrongness, awkwardness, weakness; [...] the wish to be loved; the [...] loneliness; the [...] fear" (*Cat's Eye* 419) return to her but this time she is able to discern them for what they really are, reflecting that: "They are Cordelia's; as they always were" (*Cat's Eye* 419).

By reconciliation with Cordelia, Elaine breaks free from the inculpatory one-way look, which is essential for functioning of the disciplinary society, adopts more comprehensive vision liberated from the need to judge, to blame, to normalize; and finally manages, as Osbourne argues, to identify "not only with those who shared her sense of alienation, but also with those who were her oppressors" (para 52) and "see [her] life entire." (*Cat's Eye* 398). In contrast to Elaine, Marian remains trapped in her role of the observed object, always reflecting someone's interpretation of her, always anxious that she will not be able to live up to the expectations, "ever eager to please" (*The Edible Woman* 281).

### 3. Conclusion

No matter what strategy Atwood's women characters employ to escape the normalizing one-way look of the disciplinary Watchbirds, both, Marian and Elaine, live in a system which, through constant observation, renders them docile bodies and in de Beauvoir's words, assigns them the position of the insignificant Other. In agreement with Showalter's model of women's cultural difference in patriarchal society, ascribing women the status of visible and thus inferior members, the heroines find themselves "inside two traditions simultaneously" (Mills et al. 94), the "dominant" structure and the "muted" structure. This division, based on the theory of Shirley and Edwin Ardener, suggests that society consists of two groups; "muted" and "dominant" where each group "generates its own ideas about reality at a deep level" (Ardener qtd. in Mills et al. 92) but the dominant group controls the communicative channel through which these ideas are represented. The theory premises that in the society "defined by men, some features of women do not fit that definition" (Mills et al. 93) and the ideas which represent reality of the "muted group", do not get articulated. Showalter thus defines women's fiction as a "'double-voiced discourse, containing a dominant and a muted story'" (Showalter qtd. in Mills et al. 94). The women characters in both Atwood's novels occupy their place in both dominant and muted group, the duality often giving raise to inevitable conflict.

Marian seems to be economically independent, having a regular job, supporting herself, and thus fulfilling the

substantial precondition of emancipation. Her clerical position in the market research company includes:

[...]revising the questionnaires, turning the convoluted and overly-subtle prose of the psychologists[...] into simple questions which can be understood by the people who ask them as well as the people who answer them (*The Edible Woman* 19).

Apart from this main task Marian often finds herself interviewing the respondents, tasting new food products, licking and stamping envelopes or adding and removing the thumbtacks from the wall-map, neither of these activities presenting real challenge for the university graduate. Her job fails to “[...]provide adequate self-esteem, much less pave the way to a higher level of self-realization” (Friedan 315). Marian, pondering her future prospects in Seymour Surveys, confesses her ambitions to gain a job based on her competence, abilities and qualification yet she has “only hazy notions” (*The Edible Woman* 19) of what position would suit her because, according to Beauvoir, women can achieve economic independence only as members of an economically oppressed class (714), toiling mindlessly in underpaid secretarial and clerical jobs.

Marian’s job fails to provide her with what Friedan describes as a personal purpose stretching into the future evoking her full abilities and leading to her self-realization (313). Marian, unable to realize herself in her work seeks reassurance through relationships with the members of the “dominant”, articulate structure, her boyfriend and her lover. They offer her two very distinct images. She is too frightened to accept the irresponsible, infantile feminine identity imposed on her by her fiancé

Peter, further represented by her friends and family, and seeks refuge with an eccentric student Duncan who accompanies her in her quest of her self and from his authority of an English language student helps her in vocalizing her experience. Duncan's non-conformity is in sharp contrast with the values professed by Peter, who epitomizes typical image of the young, successful, respectable, middle class man asserting his dominance over his future wife. His authority is symbolized by his profession; as a lawyer he defines and interprets the rules, and also by his strong belief in good manners and "magnanimous gallantry" (*The Edible Woman* 78), which renders Marian fragile, frivolous, in need of manly protection. In the light of Parker's assertion that in Atwood's works "the powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating" (349) Peter's authoritative power is moreover effectively reinforced by his voracious appetite.

On the contrary, Duncan, characterized by his complete ignorance of good manners, cadaverous figure and preoccupation with searching for "the real truth" (*The Edible Woman* 96) in literary works, intrigues Marian as he challenges her inactivity, presents her with manifold perspectives and unlike Peter does not oblige her to follow his lead. He describes himself as "the universal substitute" (*The Edible Woman* 145) insinuating Marian's liberty to decide about her future existence. At first Marian finds "his complete self-centredness [...] reassuring" (*The Edible Woman* 183) because he does not impose on her any expectations, but when she reaches the point at which she has to decide about her future she finds herself unable to accept the responsibility for her decision and, longing

for "simple safety" (*The Edible Woman* 263), demands his advice. Duncan fails to produce any counsel claiming: "[...] it's your own personal cul-de-sac, you invented it, you'll have to think of your own way out" (*The Edible Woman* 264) and leaves Marian to her own devices.

With Duncan's refusal to provide her with a clear image of herself that she could passively mirror and encouraged by Peter to fit the glossy public image of the sexy, young and frivolous housewife, having no clear private model of a strong-willed career woman, Marian rejects the possibility to "justify herself by her own efforts" (Beauvoire de 730) and is left to seeking her identity and self-realization "in the only channels open to her: the pursuit of sexual fulfilment, motherhood, and the possession of material things" (Friedan 315-316).

Even though in the last chapter Marian devours the cake woman which invites the readers to interpret it as an act of liberation from the ideal feminine image, Hobgood argues that, "the novel's final chapter does not provide comfortable closure, for it raises more questions than it answers" (146). The questions remain what are Marian's options after eating the cake and leaving Peter. She tells Duncan that she is looking for another job but in the economic system of the early sixties when "[the] extreme degree of sex segregation and the 'wage discrimination' [...] were often rationalized by employers, society, and women themselves" (Goldin 185), her chances to find a job challenging her intellectual capacities are rather slim. The other obvious possibility presenting itself is the security of marriage and motherhood. In the Introduction to

*The Edible Woman* written in 1979, Atwood summarizes Marian's options as follows:

It's noteworthy that my heroine's choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it. But these were the options for a young woman, even a young educated woman, in Canada in the early sixties (*The Edible Woman*, Introduction).

Between the publication of *The Edible Woman* and *Cat's Eye* Northern America saw "women of many kinds [...] in ferment [...] boiling with the pressured energy of explosive forces confined in a small place" (*Cat's Eye* 378). After the post-war period of feminine mystique, when career-woman became almost a dirty word and the image of the fiery, man-eating, loveless and lonely woman professional was misleadingly confronted with the approved stereotype of gentle, loved housewife protected by her husband and adored by her children (Friedan 101) feminism, asserting women's equality, was restored with new vigour, emerging during the sixties as a result of broader social changes intermingling with the Civil Rights Movement and New Left.

Patriarchy was recognized as system that oppressed women and feminists took action to make the public aware of injustice on women. They critically analysed and interpreted the system from their point of view claiming that: "personal problems had social causes and therefore political solutions" (Messer-Davidow 5). However, critical analysis proposing necessary changes in the society and their actual implementation did not progress equally; the gap between the theory and practice expanding to such extent that in 1971 Lillian S. Robinson demanded that feminist critics "have only interpreted the world" whereas

"the real point is to change it" (qtd. in Messer-Davidow 31). It has been also pointed out that the feminist movement failed to create alternative discourse to that of men and merely reproduced patriarchal structures of domination. Alice Echols concludes that:

"The development of a brilliant and diverse body of feminist literary theory and criticism during the 1970s and 1980s was made possible by an academic institutionalisation and specialization that, however, separated feminist inquiry from social change" (qtd. in Messer-Davidow 30).

In accord with Echols, in her Introduction to British publication of *The Edible Woman*, Atwood points out that: "The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved [...]" (*The Edible Woman*, Introduction).

Marian's situation seems to be in sharp contrast to Elaine's. Throughout *Cat's Eye* Elaine displays more decisiveness than Marian, but as a result has to face severe consequences. After confrontation with the middle class girls, who mercilessly teach her a lesson in conformity, Elaine internalises a strong belief in her own inadequacy and desperately wants to please her friends and adjust to the infantile feminine ideal. In de Beauvoir's words she refuses "to pose [herself] as the Subject, unique and absolute" which "requires great self-denial" (Introduction, lv). Elaine consciously denies herself to the point where she loses her voice, her appetite and sense of her self, becoming "only a black square filled with nothing" (*Cat's Eye* 107). The feeling of "nothingness" keeps threatening her also in her adult life (*Cat's Eye* 41, 107, 336, 377) and she still finds it particularly difficult to deal with other women because

they: "collect grievances, hold grudges and change shape. They pass hard, legitimate judgements, [...] know too much, they can neither be deceived nor trusted" (*Cat's Eye* 379).

For this reason Elaine cannot find her identity through her involvement in the group of feminist artists claiming: "[s]isterhood is a difficult concept for me" (*Cat's Eye* 345) and elsewhere: "[...] they have a certain way they want me to be, and I am not that way. They want to improve me" (*Cat's Eye* 379). In this respect Elaine still remains dominated, surrounded by the Watchbirds waiting for her to swerve off the main course. In the disciplinary society she remains powerless, always suspect, having to prove herself.

In accord with de Beauvoir's argument Elaine, "[taking] an attitude of negation and denial, [...] is not absorbed in the real: she protests against it" (739) with her paintings. She strives to escape the nothingness threatening her in the real patriarchal world but, as de Beauvoir stresses, "she can recover [the image of her soul] only in the region of the imaginary" and continues that:

To prevent an inner life that has no *useful* purpose from sinking into nothingness, to assert herself against given conditions which she bears rebelliously, to create a world other than that in which she fails to attain her being, she must resort to *self-expression* (379).

Both de Beauvoir and Friedan agree that if a woman wants to gain a sense of self through art, she needs to take it seriously and her artistic works have to be valued by other people. Elaine determines to become a painter, perseveres with painting throughout her motherhood and finally manages to earn her living by selling her works. She significantly



realizes her identity when she sees the poster for her retrospective exhibition amazed that she has "achieved a public face" and "made something of [herself]" (*Cat's Eye* 20).

Even though Elaine does not have to face the mistaken choice of either career or family as Marian and enjoys the benefits of both the family life and her painting career, she still finds herself being part of the same system which has the power to judge women making them feel deficient and peripheral. She feels "on shaky ground" (*Cat's Eye* 344) because by accepting the responsibility for her deeds she risks to be blamed by men for trespassing on their frivolous, infantile and irresponsible definition of a woman, but at the same time she risks to be blamed by women as elitist for "singling [herself] out, putting [herself] forward" (*Cat's Eye* 347). She manages to assert herself by stepping "off to the side somewhere" (*Cat's Eye* 345) to the imaginary world, still being part of the inferior "muted" group.

In this respect it could be agreed with Atwood that:

It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed. [...] The goals of the feminist movement have not been achieved, and those who claim we're living in a post-feminist era are either sadly mistaken or tired of thinking about the whole subject (*The Edible Woman, Introduction*).

## 4. Resumé

Hledání ženské identity je klíčovou náplní současné feministické kritiky, která poukazuje na zásadní rozdíl mezi tradičním pojetím role ženy ve společnosti a způsobem, jakým se vnímají ženy samy. Tímto rozporem se zabývá Margaret Atwood ve svých románech *The Edible Woman* a *Cat's Eye*. Hrdinky obou románů jsou svazovány stereotypním pojetím své společenské role, obě si uvědomují nedostatky tohoto pojetí a snaží se mu vzepřít. Hlavním cílem této práce je popsat způsoby, kterými se hrdinky snaží určit svoji identitu a srovnat rozdíly, podobnosti a případný posun ve vnímání ženské zkušenosti v závislosti na společenských změnách.

Podle tradičního pojetí jsou ženy vnímány jako křehké, jemné a slušné bytosti, které musí být ochraňovány muži před četnými nástrahami, které na ně číhají za dveřmi jejich domovů. Nicméně škála činností, kterým se může žena pod milujícím dohledem manžela věnovat, je značně omezená. Skládá se zejména z vedení domácnosti, plození dětí a existence jako oddané společnice svého manžela. Být ženou v tomto pojetí znamená být zcela závislá na muži a být mu podřízená.

Díky sufražetkám, které na začátku dvacátého století vybojovaly hlasovací právo pro ženy, se tradiční ideál slabé a závislé ženy podařilo zatlačit do ústraní, ale v době po druhé světové válce se tato chiméra vrátila v plné síle a stála za zády mladé Margaret Atwood, když psala svůj román *The Edible Woman*.

Jedním z paradoxů poválečné éry bylo to, že ačkoliv byly ženy téměř ideálně vybaveny k tomu, aby vstoupily do náročného světa mužů, mnoho z nich se dobrovolně rozhodlo zůstat doma. Důvodů, které je k tomu vedly bylo hned několik; popularita Freudových teorií spolu s poznatky nově vzniklých společenských věd založených na Freudových poznatcích, systém vzdělávání, poválečná touha po lásce ztělesněná rodinou s matkou v jejím středu a v neposlední řadě ekonomické zájmy.

Kupodivu mnohé z těch žen, které hledaly uspokojení v rodinném životě pociťovaly nespokojenost, únavu a vyčerpanost. Betty Friedan se ve své studii *Feminine Mystique* snažila najít příčiny rostoucí nespokojenosti a došla k překvapujícímu závěru, že ženy v domácnosti nemají dostatek příležitostí plně využít svůj potenciál, což vede k pocitu frustrace, neužitečnosti, ztrátě sebevědomí a v důsledku toho i vlastní identity.

Na první pohled se může zdát, že takové ženě nic nebrání, aby svou situaci vyřešila a začala chodit do práce, případně si našla jinou užitečnou a naplňující činnost. Nicméně Molly Hite ve své práci naznačuje, že ženy jsou ve své podřízené pozici udržovány velmi mocným mechanismem, který funguje v disciplinární společnosti, jak ji popsal Michel Foucault. V takové společnosti je každému objektu přesně vymezeno jeho místo a funkce a jejich dodržování je kontrolováno neustálým dozorem a srovnáváním s normou.

Toto probíhá tak dlouho, až objekt sledování přijme normu za vlastní a sleduje sám sebe, uvědomujíc si své nedostatky, což vede k pocitům vlastní neschopnosti a následně viny.

Friedan tvrdí, že díky tomu, že se ženy v poválečném období snažily ztotožnit s ideálem ženy v domácnosti se dostaly do pozice, kdy nemusely využívat svých tvůrčích schopností a zabředly do role, která byla hluboko pod hranicí jejich schopností, v důsledku čehož se cítily nevyužité a neužitečné. Tyto pocity viny pak mnohé řešily tím, že povýšily domácí práce a péči o rodinu na jediný smysl svého života a odsoudily se tak k postupné ztrátě vlastního já, existujíc pouze skrze své děti a manžela.

Marian, hrdinka románu *The Edible Woman*, který Atwood napsala na začátku šedesátých let, je součástí disciplinární společnosti od narození. Vyrůstá v prostředí malého města, kde jsou mechanismy pozorování, srovnávání a hodnocení obzvláště silně vyvinuté. Marian se bez přemýšlení podrobuje pravidlům, které pro ni vytvořili jiní a nedělá jí problém se pod vlivem svého konzervativního přítele Petera stylizovat do role rozumné ženy, která přesně ví, co se sluší a patří.

Svou roli pasivního předmětu cizích představ si uvědomí ve chvíli, kdy Peter vypráví zážitky z honu a ona se ztotožní s uloveným králíkem, paralyzovaná a neschopná ovlivňovat svůj život. Ve snaze vymanit se z dosahu Peterova autoritativního pohledu se snaží utéct, ale Peter ji dohoní a přinutí ji, aby svůj útěk viděla jako pošetilost. Poučena, že odpor na veřejnosti neodvrátí normalizující pohledy, ale naopak přitáhne pozornost k její „abnormalitě“, Marian zkouší další taktiku, tentokrát se schová před Peterovým pohledem pod postel a tam si uvědomuje nejen pocit vlastní svobody, ale také zodpovědnosti za své jednání. Vědoma si vybočení z normy, Marian zažívá pocity viny a když má volit mezi jednodušší a

bezpečnější cestou přizpůsobení se tomu, jak ji vidí ostatní a nejistou a složitější cestou hledání vlastní identity, tak zvolí jednodušší variantu.

Atwood v předmluvě k britskému vydání *The Edible Woman* píše, že v šedesátých letech byly jedinými možnostmi mladých žen buď jednotvárná práce v kanceláři nebo sňatek s mužem, který jim zajistí budoucnost, obě nabízející mizivou příležitost k seberealizaci.

Elaine, hrdinka románu *Cat's Eye*, který Atwood publikovala dvacet čtyři let od vydání *The Edible Woman* se liší od Marian tím, že prožívá netradiční dětství. Jako dcera svobodomyšlného přírodovědce nežije v uzavřeném společenství, ale neustále cestuje a nemá příležitost nasáknout stereotypy o genderovém rozdělení rolí v poválečné společnosti. Když je jí devět let, její rodina se natrvalo usadí na předměstí Toronta a malá Elaine vděčně absorbuje stereotypy, kterým ji učí její kamarádky. Brzy si však uvědomí, že nesplňuje normu, což i u ní vede k palčivým pocitům vlastní nedokonalosti a viny.

Arbitrem její nedokonalosti se stává její kamarádka Cordelia, která se snaží zmírnit své pocity viny tím, že je přesouvá na Elaine. Elaine si vypěstuje silný pocit méněcennosti, ale postupem času se naučí ignorovat mínění ostatních lidí, přebírá Cordeliinu techniku a odvrací kritický pohled zpátky na Cordelii. Aby přežila v disciplinární společnosti, Elaine potlačuje své emoce a prohlašuje, že nechce o nikom vědět příliš mnoho, protože to ji pak nutí chápat jeho pohnutky a tím nad ní získává moc.

Elaine se rozhodne potlačit svoje city, uzavírá se do sebe a oplácí Cordelii stejnou mincí. Zjišťuje, že jako žena má v patriarchálním systému omezené schopnosti vyjádření vlastní zkušenosti, ale uvědomuje si sílu vlastního pohledu a utíká se k sebevyjádření skrze umění. Tím, že se stává malířkou si přisvojí možnost pozorovat druhé lidi a tím do nich promítat své představy, což je v disciplinární společnosti výhradou „mocných“, nicméně nedokáže se zcela osvobodit, protože stále vnímá svět, a sama je vnímána, skrze termíny používané k vyjádření mužské zkušenosti a nedokáže pojmenovat svoji ženskou zkušenost.

Ačkoliv je mezi oběma romány zřetelný posun ve vnímání ženské zkušenosti umožněný osvětovou a analytickou činností kritiček hlásících se ke druhé vlně feminismu například Friedan, Millet, de Beauvoir, Gubar and Gilbert a dalších, jejichž práce popsaly a tak umožnily pochopit fungování patriarchální společnosti, feministická kritika stále operuje v prostoru definovaném muži, používá k vyjádření jejich nástrojů a zůstává tak součástí patriarchálního systému.

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## 6. Appendixes

### Appendix 1 Biography of Margaret Atwood

Adapted from "Atwood, Margaret Eleanor, 1939-." by Matthew Kibble, Literature Online.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada to Carl Edmund and Margaret Dorothy (Killam) Atwood, a dietician. She has a brother, who is a neurophysiologist, and a younger sister. Every year from April to November her family lived in the Quebec wilderness, where her father, a forest entomologist and 'a very woodsy man', did research for the government. As a result, Margaret 'grew up in and out of the bush, in and out of Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie and Toronto' and was eleven years old before she attended a full year of school. She began when she was about six to write 'morality plays, poems, comic books, and an unfinished novel about an ant'. Although she abandoned that pursuit after a couple of years in favour of plans for a career in home economics, in high school she again wrote poetry and at sixteen committed herself to a writing career. 'It was suddenly the only thing I wanted to do,' she explained to Joyce Carol Oates in an interview for the New York Review of Books (May 21, 1978).

After graduating from Leaside High School in 1957, Margaret Atwood studied English literature in the honors program at Victoria College of the University of Toronto. As an undergraduate she reviewed books and wrote articles for the college literary magazine, and when she was nineteen she had the gratification of seeing her first poem accepted for

publication. In 1961, the year in which she received her B.A. degree, *Double Persephone*, her first volume of poetry, was published in Toronto by Hawkshead Press. In the following year she obtained a Master of Arts degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

During her year at Radcliffe, Margaret Atwood concentrated on Victorian literature, and after winning a Woodrow Wilson fellowship she continued her study of Victorian literature and of Gothic romances at Harvard University in 1962-63. For the next two years, she worked at such jobs as market researcher, cashier, and waitress, using whatever free time she had at her disposal to write. Although she returned to Harvard in 1965 to continue her doctoral work, she left two years later without completing her dissertation.

From 1971 to 1973 she worked for the House of Anansi in Toronto as an editor and member of the board of directors.

Having realised during her years at Harvard that no critical study of the body of Canadian literature had ever been published, Margaret Atwood set out to remedy that deficiency. After making an exhaustive 'read-in', she prepared her introductory survey, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, which was published by the House of Anansi in 1972. The book's overwhelming success also brought its drawbacks. 'Largely because of [*Survival*],' Margaret Atwood recounted in *World Authors*, 'I became a combination target and cult figure, and began to feel a rather pressing need for privacy.' As a result, she moved to a one-hundred-acre farm she had purchased in Alliston, Ontario and left her job with the House of Anansi to become a full-time writer. About the time *Survival* was

published, she ended her five-year marriage to an American novelist whom she had met at Harvard and began living with the Canadian novelist Graeme Gibson.

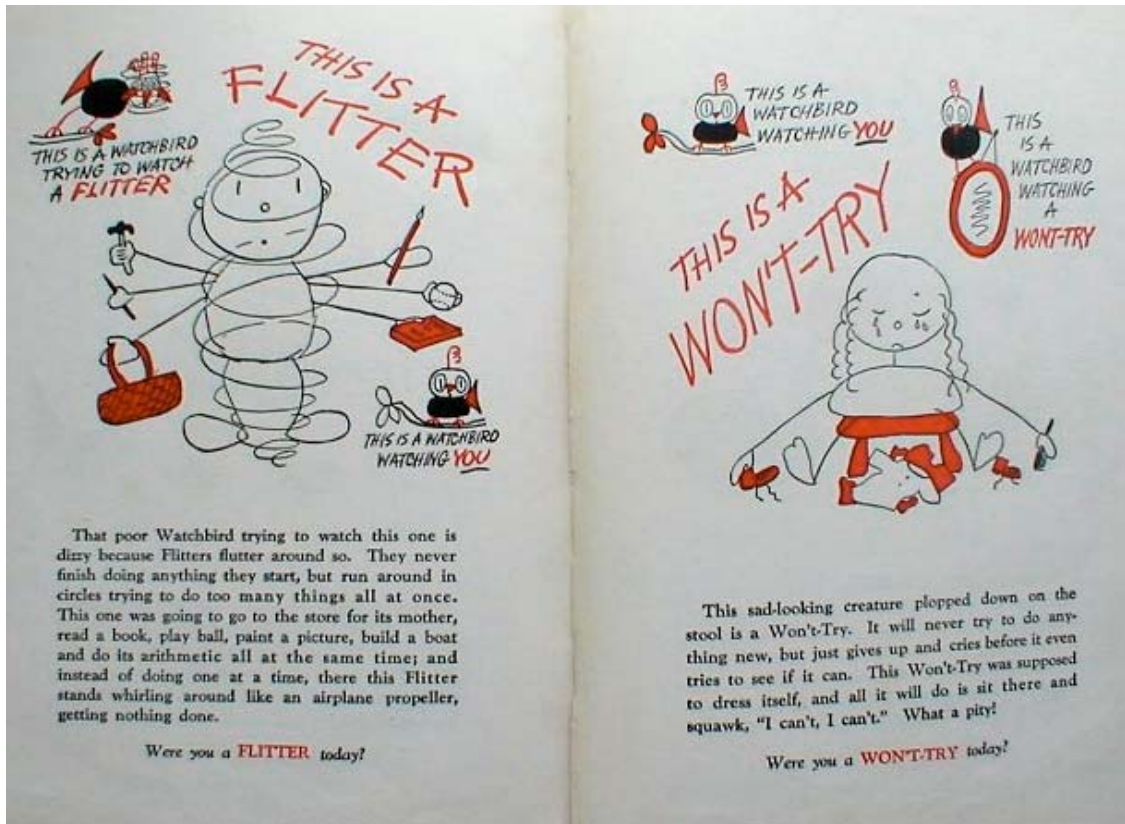
Her increasing involvement during the mid-1970s in human-rights issues, her membership in Amnesty International, and her extensive travels in the southern Caribbean resulted in a considerable expansion of Margaret Atwood's perimeters. She began to explore political as well as personal and sexual violence and the relationships between countries and cultures as well as those between individuals. In her introduction to *Second Words* (Anansi, 1982; Beacon Pr., 1984), a selection of her critical prose, she explained that widening of vision:

When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing -- if you follow it -- will take you places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me.

Atwood proved to be very versatile and prolific author, apart from her poems she has published numerous novels, short stories, children's books, critical essays, lectures and even edited a cook book.

Except for her studies in the USA, and brief periods spent in Europe, Atwood has lived in Canada all her life; she has been based in Toronto since 1992.

## Appendix 2 Image of the Watchbird



## 7. Údaje pro knihovnickou databázi

Název práce	Specifikum ženské zkušenosti v románové tvorbě Margaret Atwood
Autor práce	Pavla Chudějová
Obor	Učitelství anglického jazyka
Rok obhajoby	2005
Vedoucí práce	Libora Oates-Indruchová, PhD
Anotace	Práce se zabývá společenským klimatem v Kanadě v době vzniku děl Margaret Atwood, <i>The Edible Woman</i> a <i>Cat's Eye</i> a podobnostmi, rozdíly a posuny ve popisu a vnímání ženské zkušenosti.
Klíčová slova	Margaret Atwood <i>The Edible Woman</i> <i>Cat's Eye</i> ženská zkušenost feminismus feminine mystique identita disciplinární společnost